

**2012 State of the City Address
Mayor Lawrence J. Morrissey
City of Rockford, Illinois**

“OUR CITY. OUR STORY. OUR TIME.”

I. INTRODUCTION

Members of the Rockford City Council, fellow elected officials, community and civic board leaders, fellow citizens and guests, good evening and welcome to the 2012 State of the City Address. It is my honor again to join you in reviewing the State of our great City as we continue our progress through difficult times.

Each year I have given this Address, I have called us to be self reliant as a community. We can't depend upon the State or Federal Governments to “bail us out” or take care of our local problems. Tonight, it is my intent to point out in very blunt and sobering terms and illustrations the sobering challenges that we face together as a community, but more importantly, it is my hope that I will demonstrate that it is our deeds, our actions, and our deliberate and determined steps into the future that will define and shape our community. It is not top 10 lists--not our State and Federal partners, but a renewed commitment and determination within ourselves and our community that will define us as we strive to the challenging vision of Excellence Everywhere for Everyone for Rockford, Illinois. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to express to you tonight that I am proud to serve as your Mayor in our City, I am proud to share our Story, and I am here to tell you that it is right here... right now...that I say to you that it is Our Time. A time that will redefine us--a time that will redeem us--and a time that will reshape us for generations into the future.

Tonight, there are two questions that I would like us to answer:

- First, to what length are we willing to go to work together in our community knowing that we are on our own?
- And, second, what new courage and what new strength might we find, and what bold ideas might we pursue, if we know that no-one but us stands in way of our achievement?

I am less concerned about how miserable *Forbes* magazine might think us to be or how low *Money Magazine* has ranked us in their list. I am not ignoring the fact that we have one of the highest violent crime rates and property tax rates in the country. I am also not ignoring the fact that it was just reported yesterday that we are one of the most obese cities in the country.

Tonight, I am focused on how we think of ourselves, how we define ourselves, and how we will challenge ourselves to become the city we want to become. Do we believe in a vision of Excellence Everywhere for our City or have we diminished our dreams to the expectations of what others have for us?

The real question is what are we going to do about it? Are we going to let the story end there and let the rest of the world define us? Or, are we ready to get going, start living, and start producing? Are WE ready ... not just me and the city council and those in office, but all of us. By my measure, there's plenty of work for everyone, and it will take everyone to reshape our future.

Tonight, I want us to think only of how we define ourselves. Let us not worry about anyone else. Let us ask what we, each of us, are willing to do to make a different ending to the story. We must tonight, this night, consider our own abilities, creativity, confidence, determination and vision. This is all that matters because...

This is Our City. This is Our Story. This is Our Time.

I don't know about you, but I for one can hear growing louder, right now, right here, right in this beautiful Theater, a growing momentum and rhythmic heartbeat of positive change for our city... and it's not coming from Washington or Springfield, it's not coming from *Forbes* or *Money* Magazine. It is not even coming from Gallup who this week stated we are the 4th most obese metro area in the nation. I blame that on our wonderful restaurants. Our momentum for positive change is coming from those determined individual souls within our city that wake up every morning and say I can change our city. I can impact our story. And I can make a positive difference in our time.

It is the collective soul and determination of this community that says we have the ability to become whatever we have the courage to dream and pursue. And without prodding, without asking for permission, the voice of our future, our young people, are ready to move, ready to act, and ready to tell Our Story.

II. ECONOMIC CRISIS CONTINUES

Thank you to our local filmmaker, Pablo Karona, and [name of boxing guy] for that wonderful video. I hope that gives you a glimpse of what's ahead. I also hope you are inspired to stay confident and hopeful while I share with you some of the tough facts that we have to accept as we move forward.

A. City Budget Challenges

As we know all too well, the City has struggled for years as we've dealt with a sluggish world economy, increasing labor costs, pension costs, and health care costs, dilapidated infrastructure and housing, and a property tax base that has been declining since 2009. We've lost over \$150 million in our tax base during that time. Sales tax revenues for 2011 were at 2001 levels. Our unemployment rate continues to be very high at 13.7% for the City and 12.5% for the metro area, ranking us as having the 20th highest metro unemployment rate in the country.

Recognizing our challenge, our City Council has aggressively managed our budget process. We've started earlier, meeting as often as we've needed. As a result, we've passed our last two budgets earlier than any time that anyone on the Council can remember. Most importantly, those budgets have each been balanced. In fact, we finished 2011 with a positive fund balance. I want to thank each and every City Council member tonight, and I ask you to stand and be recognized for your loyal and unwavering service to your community.

We've also continued to pay down general fund, long-term debt obligations

It hasn't been easy, we're down over 100 employees since 2008 and we're at the lowest level of staffing per city resident since the records we have going back to 1980. We feel the stresses of short staffing every day just as our taxpayers have felt the stresses of tighter financial constraints. We know there are many shared struggles every day in our community. But I'm proud of the results we've achieved under these conditions. We'll need the same type of effort moving forward since we are already projecting a \$3.6 million deficit for 2013.

I wish our partners at the State and Federal could use Rockford as an example of facing fiscal challenges head on and making difficult choices to achieve a balanced budget be as successful.

B. State Budget Woes

From the Recent Report from the Civic Federation, "Given rising Medicaid and pension costs and the scheduled partial sunset of the income tax increase, the Civic Federation's analysis shows that Illinois' unpaid bills could rise to \$34.8 billion by the end of FY2017."

As of June 30, 2011, the State of Illinois has accumulated unfunded pension liabilities of \$83.1 billion and a combined funded ratio of 43.3% according to the Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability's November 2011 *Monthly Briefing*.

The combined impact of Illinois unfunded pension liability and unpaid bills has lead to the State being graded in January as having the worst bond rating in the nation according to Moody's and the second worst according to Standard & Poor's. Looking at it another way, when you view the combined effect of unfunded pension liabilities and debt as a percent of annual State revenues Illinois has been said to be "in a League of It's Own."

I appreciate Governor's commitment in his recent State Budget Address to tackle the toughest parts of the State's Budget including Medicaid and Pension funding.

The challenges are immense. To get through this, local communities will feel the pain. In our case, we have already heard of the proposed closure of Singer Mental Health Center. An even more significant impact will likely be the State's proposal to shift responsibility for paying the employers portion of Downstate Teacher Pensions.

The largest portion of the State's unfunded pension liabilities are related to downstate teacher pensions, which the State has historically paid. The current proposal from State leaders is to

hand all of those liabilities back to local school districts as a way of shifting those annual pension costs. Obviously, if that's all that's done, such a maneuver isn't solving anything; it just amounts to moving the obligation from one government body to another. In the end, taxpayers are still on the hook.

If this move happens, it will add to the financial stress of our local public schools. It would also put school districts on par with cities and counties who have always had to pay the "employer" share of their employees' pensions. While it makes sense that the employer would pay the bill for the employees benefits, this change in practice would be a tremendous financial "shock" to our public schools. According to recent Rockford Register Star report, citing Cedric Lewis, the District's Chief Financial Officer, the hit to the District's budget could be as high as \$36 million (Rockford Register Star, Millions at Stake for Schools with Change in Pension Plans, February 11, 2012.)

C. Massive, Growing Federal Debt

Matters are no better for our federal government. Over the last several years, we have seen massive growth in annual federal budget deficits. In fact, the Federal Debt, the accumulation of all budget deficits from the founding of our nation to today, has grown to over \$15 trillion. As a percentage of Gross Domestic Product, the Federal Debt is at levels not seen since World War II.

Despite these challenges, it has been years since Congress has actually passed a budget on time. In fact, the budget "can" has been kicked down the road in the form of emergency extensions for both the annual operating budget and the highway trust fund. At a time when our nation's economy needs fundamental restructuring, national political gridlock seems to be the norm.

This is why I am firmly convinced that "we're on our own." It will be financially impossible for our nation to sustain this current massive rate of deficit spending with sluggish growth. So what are the implications for Rockford?

- First, we must prepare for cuts in federal spending that will impact our City's poor most directly. I expect our local block grant entitlement funds, affordable housing funds, student aid and education funds, and Medicaid funds will likely be cut dramatically.
- Second, we should not expect to be saved by a growing amount economic development funds from Washington. If we can get some help, then great, but it is really up to our City, our State, and our local partners to chart our own path for recovery and tell our own story.

III. Building for the Future: Resilience, Self-Reliance, & State and Local Partnerships

A. Rebuilding Rockford

Thankfully, our citizens have approved local investment funds for our roads and other public infrastructure to help us build a lasting and sustainable economic foundation. We've come a long way since we passed our first *Rebuilding Rockford* referendum in 2007. We're building the strong physical infrastructure for a strong city.

Despite the terrible recession that we continue to endure, last March, nearly 75% of our citizen taxpayers who came out voted "yes" to extend the program for another 5 years. I'm convinced that we've gotten that support because we've done what we've said we would do and we've included our citizens in the process. Thank you again for your outstanding support! Thanks to you, we're successfully pursuing our goals of investing in not only the R's: Roads, Rail, Riverfront; but also two more: Runways, and fiber Ring!

- We've already generated \$65 million in sales tax funds, which has helped us bring an addition.
- We've made major strides to reduce the hazards caused by stormwater and flooding acquiring 112 homes and businesses in the Keith Creek Floodway, tearing down over 88 of those structures to prepare for the long-term improvements to that floodway.
- Over and above those investments, construction should begin soon on the State's rail improvements to bring passenger rail back to Rockford and a new \$13 million South Main Rail and Multi-Modal Transportation Station.
- By mid-summer, we will also all be able to enjoy the completed Riverwalk section at our Riverfront Museum Campus.
- We're also near completion on \$75 million water system improvement plan through our Water Utility that is bringing vastly improved water quality to our citizens and businesses.
- We're also building a lasting partnership with the Airport Authority, Winnebago County and other regional public and private partners to ensure long-term growth and job creation at the Rockford Airport. Through this effort, we now have a proposal that will leverage \$5 million in local funds to build a \$9.5 million capital project that will rebuild the main roadways into the airport and eliminate bight around the airport.
- We've commenced generation shaping projects like the rebuilding of South Main Street and West State Street through our partnership with the State of Illinois.
- And we have begun with the great help of the State of Illinois and Governor Quinn the construction of the new Morgan Street Bridge, which began with the demolition of the old bridge. This will culminate in a new Bridge that will become a link for cars, trucks, emergency vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians.

All told, we will invest over \$82 million in road and infrastructure projects through our local funds and leveraged State and Federal funds between now and the end of 2016. Some have criticized the fact that we're making these types of investment in areas on the City's West Side. *This is Our City. Our Story. Our Time.* We're making our future a better future. I think Aldermen Hervey says it best.

B. Tourism and Economic Development Successes

Despite our tough economy, we are investing Downtown through creative efforts like the Energy Performance Contracts that our City Council achieved in partnership with RAVE and the Coronado Performing Arts Center that has brought modern “green” energy systems to our Coronado Theater and BMO Harris Bank Center.

Despite our challenges, we’re moving forward on a regional vision to “Reclaim First” in the youth sports market. Our plan involves multiple local governments and our local tourism industry and will result in a new \$10 million indoor multi-sport venue downtown along the riverfront.

Despite our challenges, our local Discovery Museum was again recognized as one of the Country’s top children’s museums and Anderson Japanese Gardens was recognized as the Country’s number one Japanese Garden.

And because of our tough economy, our City Council made the change from the old way of handing out diminishing amounts of support for economic development efforts. Now we are supporting a network of commercial and retail commercial districts who will better leverage our limited resources. Through the “EDEEN” fund, we’re building networks of neighborhood based partners to support Economic Development through Education and Entrepreneurship and Networking. EDEEN will help entrepreneurs to grow an idea and grow a business.

Despite our challenges, we have seen so many of our local businesses expand over the last year including B.E. Aerospace, Rockford Toolcraft, and Hamilton Sundstrand, and Woodward, and, of course, the huge boost we will get from the expansion at Chrysler.

And I am proud that Governor Quinn invited me to participate last year in his China Trade Mission because he knows how important Rockford is to the State economy and he wants to help our local employers to expand our exports. I was also recently honored to be named to Governor Quinn’s Export Advisory Council on behalf of our community. It is a high honor and I look forward to sharing our successes and ideas for how to grow our State’s economy.

During these times of challenge, Rockford is stepping up to innovate and innovation is really nothing new for us. It’s the story of our past. It’s the story of our future. Let’s hear one of those stories from our past that I know will inspire our future.

IV. Service Delivery Alternatives Help to Deal with General Fund Stress

Our community’s support for innovative and bold capital projects demonstrates our commitment for creating a new story to tell about our future. We are building the infrastructure and capital projects of a healthy and prosperous city. In fact, although sales taxes have been down, we have been able to stretch our dollars further because contractors have lowered their bids to compete for business during the recession. Unfortunately, our general fund that pays for Police and Fire services has not been able to perform in a similar manner. As I have said many times before, while the City’s revenue base has gone down, arbitrators have forced substantial pay increases on our taxpayers. We have responded to these challenges by looking throughout our

organization for alternatives for service delivery that will lower our costs while maintaining or improving our service.

A. RockStat

Underlying all of our efforts to improve our core management is our monthly operations meeting known as RockStat. RockStat is our continuous improvement system. It ensures that each and every month we review our progress openly and transparently. I am proud of the work that our City Council and staff perform; and I am proud to demonstrate each month that we will adjust our management to respond to the changing conditions we face.

This approach allows you, our citizen taxpayers, to monitor the details of our operations. This is, after all, your government. This approach also us to understand when we can adjust our efforts internally to improve an outcome. This approach also lets us know that there are certain transformational goals that we simply cannot achieve on our own.

B. Fire Department QRV Deployment

One of those areas is our City Council's investment in two "Quick Response Vehicles" Or "QRV's". We began deploying these vehicles in January as an alternative for our Fire Department to respond to a medical emergency. Under the old way, the only equipment we had to accompany an ambulance to an emergency medical response was a large engine or ladder. The continuous running of these very expensive types of firefighting equipment caused tremendous wear and tear on the vehicles.

So far the results have been outstanding. Not only are the new QRV's saving taxpayers money by preventing us from having to run our primary firefighting equipment, the outstanding news for public safety is that the smaller and more agile QRV's are arriving at emergency medical calls, on average, over 50 seconds faster than the larger types of equipment. When our firefighter emergency responders arrive sooner, they have a better chance of treating patients and saving lives. Thank you to our Fire Chief, City Administrator Jim Ryan, our City Council, and our firefighters for this innovative effort. Congratulations also on achieving national accreditation for our Fire Department. Your entire team and the department do a great job and it is wonderful to be recognized for your accomplishments.

C. Fleet Leasing

I am also proud that our City Council made the major decision to switch to leasing vehicle fleet. Our funds have simply not been sufficient to buy new equipment to keep up with the continuous use of our vehicles. Our Police Department, Public Works Department, and Fire Department never stop. That's part of our job of providing emergency services. That's also why our vehicles take a pounding.

Under our new plan, over the next three years, we will completely convert our fleet to leasing. By doing this, we anticipate saving about \$1 million in annual maintenance. We will also reduce our fleet by over 100 vehicles. Most importantly, we will have a plan in place that is financially sustainable and will ensure that we can provide necessary emergency equipment to respond to our citizens calls.

D. Public Works: Street Sweeping

Our City Council also made the decision recently to outsource our street sweeping operations to achieve similar goals: to improve efficiency and effectiveness. No City employees were laid off by this decision. Instead, the former Street Sweepers will now move to our Forestry Division of Public Works. The move of these staff members to Forestry comes at a critical time. We now face a long-term battle with the Emerald Ash Borer. By the accounts of other communities infested by this pest, it will mean the loss of almost all of our City's 14,000 Ash Trees. That number does not even account for other governments' tree inventory, nor does it account for trees in private yards. The bottom line, is that this demonstrates another significant challenge for which we will need all of the community resources we can muster.

E. City Health & Wellness: Healthy Rockford

When I was elected in 2005, our City Health Insurance Fund was under water. We were drowning with a fund deficit over \$3 million and soon it would sink our General Fund. Our path to improve the Fund was not easy. We had long and hard bargaining sessions with our Police, Fire, and AFSCME unions and ultimately had to arbitrate many of the issues. While we still have a long way to go, but through those efforts we are getting greater participation by our employees in sharing plan costs. As a result, we have turned the Health Insurance Fund around and it now has a reserve balance of \$4.5 million.

Moving forward, our goal is not only to manage a positive fund balance, our real goal is to improve the health and wellness of our City employees and the community at large. We know that we have a tremendous amount of avoidable sickness among our City employees. But we also know we have those same issues throughout our City, and, for that matter, throughout our nation. And as I said earlier, we just learned through a Gallup study that we are the 4th most obese city in the country. Again, are we going to let these results define us?

Not a chance. Thus, our goal is to create a "Healthy Rockford Network" that supports health and prosperity for all of our citizens. This is not a marketing campaign that tries to mask the fact that we are an overweight and out-of-shape city. This is about using proven methods to improve health by fighting obesity, increasing exercise, improving diet and nutrition, and providing tools for proactive mentoring and evaluation by trained health professionals.

To accomplish this goal, we will need the leadership and support of our health and wellness partners in this community. We will adopt the best ideas and practices we can find. And we will set the goal of having the greatest improvement in health outcomes of any city in the country. I believe that we can be a national center for health and wellness and disease control, and, by the way, that also means jobs.

We will start by using the aggregated power of our city employees to build a base for positive changes in our health delivery system and how we price our system. We have already started to reward employees for participating in wellness activities. Our employees pay a lower premium for participating in these programs. We believe that we can build an even more robust system of rewards for healthy lifestyles and health improvement when we involve community partners. I also believe that along this path we will develop new areas of expertise that we must learn and once we learn, then we should become a national center where others come to learn how we did it. Make no mistake about it, we're going to keep tracking our obesity rate, or "FatStat" for short. This will be a benchmark that all of us can monitor to help us tell the world our new story.

F. Legislative Reforms Needed

I am proud of our efforts and successes to improve efficiencies in how we run our city; but I know we can do more. Unfortunately, we are hampered by significant State law barriers that prevent us from moving forward.

- While we appreciate the 2010 legislative changes to the State's Pension System for local government employees, those reforms do not go far enough. We need reforms that will impact current employees as well as future employees.
- We must also change state law so that our elected City Council and not the Fire Union gets to decide the "minimum manning" levels of our Fire Department. Our taxpayers elect city council members with the expectation that we make the best decision balancing cost concerns and public safety concerns. The existing law undermines that authority. Our City Council has joined the Illinois Municipal League in supporting SB 3776 that would correct the situation. Please push for support of SB 3776 and HB 4441.
- We must also clarify that a community's "ability to pay" in collective bargaining is based on current revenues so that an arbitrator can't induce a tax hike by awarding out-of-line pay increases.
- And we must repeal the 2007 "Anti-Substitution" Law that artificially raises the cost of our fire service by preventing cities like Rockford from incorporating part-time staffing into its department.

Please contact our local legislators, and State Leaders to let them know you support giving your elected City Council the ability to manage the allocation of resources. While your at it, be sure to thank our local legislators for supporting the change in State law that has enabled us to put the energy aggregation referendum on next week's ballot.

G. Energy Aggregation

A "YES" vote next week on the Electrical Aggregation Referendum will allow our City to negotiate on behalf of our citizens to bring lower cost electrical power to our citizens. It's a chance for our residents and small businesses to save an estimated 20 to 30 percent on our energy costs. It's just that simple. If you vote "yes" and later decide you don't want to take the offer the City negotiates, then you are free to change your mind. There is really no down side to the opportunity. This is a great example of the savings we can achieve when our citizens can come together with one voice. I ask that you vote "YES" next week to save money on electric power.

H. Law Enforcement Advances and Challenges:

One of our greatest, continuing challenges is our violent crime rate in the City. While we have seen major improvement in our overall crime rate over the last 10 years, our violent crime rate has remained far too high. Responding to our high violent crime rate is even more frustrating and challenging because we have been down over 20 police officers from a high of 306 prior to the start of the recession. While our loss of staffing is difficult, I am energized by the efforts of our regional law enforcement community to deal with the immediate threats to our community.

In 2011, we began a partnership with Winnebago County known as “Operation Clean Sweep.” Our goal is to do together what we can’t do alone. By working with multiple police departments, prosecutors, and community partners, we are able to deploy a substantial and consistent response to the chaos of drugs, gangs, and violent crime. I want to thank Sheriff Myers, Chief Epperson, Chairman Christiansen, and Mike Dunn. We worked as a team to start that process and we will continue.

Our 2012 plan will include a focus with our partners on the problem of “career criminals”. We will also continue to rely on our citizen leaders who have participated in our Citizen’s Police Academy and who have volunteered to work with our Citizens Assisting the Police program. Thank you again to our newly appointed citizen coordinator, Joe Owen, and the many other volunteers who together worked over 2000 hours in 2011 and have no plans of slowing down in 2012.

By the end of this year, we also expect to have our Geographic Policing Pilot Police District ready in District 2. Again, our approach and philosophy is clear: we are decentralizing our department into our neighborhoods to bring our problem solving team closer to the citizens that we serve.

Finally, I am pleased that we have a much more consistent discussion with our criminal justice partners to share information and ideas for improving outcomes. I want to recognize our Chief Judge, Joe McGraw, and County Board Chair, Scott Christiansen, for their commitment to support a team approach to sharing data and improving outcomes using every tool available to us. Our focus right now is on individuals who have been arrested and are out on bond, parole, or probation. Our goal is to work with State and local criminal justice and human services partners to reduce recidivism. We want adult and juvenile ex-offenders to improve their lives. We also want them to know that we will not tolerate repeat offenses.

V. Underlying Social Dynamics: Public Education, Public Housing & Structural Poverty

City Service Calls

Our City’s customer service map provide a visual summation of the areas that originate calls for service for our Police and Fire Departments, Public Works Department, and Neighborhood Code Enforcement. The map shows areas of the City with highly concentrated problems. But this City service map by itself does not tell the whole story. It may trigger a response from one of our staff, but it does not explain why these calls for service are happening. It does not address the root cause behind the problem.

Public School Challenges

The truth is that there is a well known larger crisis looming over us that we don’t need a map to explain. Our Rockford Public Schools is our future prosperity. But we all know too well of the challenges that have faced our Public Schools. While many of our public schools suffer from physical deterioration, their even bigger problem comes from the underlying poverty and disorder that has plagued the neighborhoods in which they are located. We know that many children from the neighborhoods identified in the concentrated “hot spot” map have not

succeeded in school. And we know well that failure to thrive in school, failure to achieve a high school diploma or GED at a minimum, means limited job prospects and a likely path toward poverty or crime.

Poverty, Housing, and Unemployment

Since the 1970's, Rockford has seen its average household income decline substantially compared to the National average. Rockford also parallels what has happened across our nation. There has been a widening gap between rich and poor. In Rockford, many of those poor wind up in concentrated areas of our community living in Public Housing or Section 8 rental voucher housing. Without an education and without a job, there are limited prospects for these individuals.

But despite our high unemployment, I often hear from Rockford area employers that they are unable to find talented workers to keep up with their needs. Unfortunately, many of our young people growing up in poverty in these troubled areas never graduate high school or achieve a GED. Thus, they simply do not have the skills for available jobs. Moreover, because the area has such a large, disproportionate amount of public housing tied to the property codes of the neighborhood, if an individual does get a good education and does get a good job, the reward is moving to the so-called "good side of town." Thus, the cycle of poverty and crime has continued for decades in concentrated areas of our community.

VI. Community -School Empowerment Zones: Intervention, Partnership, Shared Ownership, Accountability

We can reverse the cycle of poverty. We can create a different ending to the story. But we must directly face the facts of a failed public housing and human services system. Far too often our bureaucratic support system, intended to help individuals, has simply "enabled" individuals to stay in poverty. Instead of providing a pathway out of poverty, the system has sustained them in poverty. Frankly, we need a community "intervention". The enablers need to stop enabling and the co-dependent need to become independent. And for our efforts to succeed, we need to work as a team, which includes a consistent and productive partnership with our Rockford Public Schools.

A. Community-School Relationship

As I have said many times before, as go our schools, so goes the City of Rockford. Thankfully, I can say tonight that we've come a long way over the last year in creating a positive working partnership with the Rockford Public Schools. I want to personally thank the School Board, the Administration, and our Rockford Teachers and staff for their mutual commitments to that improved environment. While there are obviously conflicts and challenges, especially during the collective bargaining process, there have been tremendous gains. For that, I am extremely grateful both as a mayor and a father.

Because of these improvements, I am able to discuss progress toward long-term community and school improvement. I fully endorse the "Readiness Rocks" goals that Dr. Willis has

identified with his Board and we are doing everything we can to help the District achieve those goals.

B. Community-School Empowerment Zones

We've had several meetings with District 205 since Dr. Willis laid out his *Readiness Rocks* agenda. At its core, our strategy is simple: we are connecting our neighborhoods and our schools and we're leveraging city and community resources to support our schools, our children, and our families. We will not let institutional boundaries and silos prevent us from providing the pathways and support needed for students, families, and schools to succeed. This may sound intuitive and logical, but in the world of government, it is revolutionary. But it's a revolution that has a lot of followers.

We are actually adopting an approach that is very similar to that which we heard discussed by Geoffrey Canada, known for his groundbreaking work with the Harlem Children's Zone. Many of us heard Mr. Canada discuss their successes in Harlem when he spoke this past year to a large gathering of leaders in our community. The community-school partnership movement is actually well grounded in many schools throughout our country.

We have already identified the pilot geographic areas where we will begin. We are currently sharing data and mapping our challenges and our resources. And we have a great start with our partners at the Rockford Housing Authority, Workforce Investment Board, and City Human Services Department. These organizations have already begun a coordinated pilot effort at Blackhawk Housing Development. They are encouraging success and through an approach they call "Rebuild" are working to help families achieve self sufficiency. Through our partnership with District 205, moreover, they are also working with Beyer Elementary School across the Street to ensure that both parents and children have a plan for success.

Our work is just beginning, but we are already seeing many new ideas emerge. We are challenging ourselves to do together what we can't do alone. For example, we are asking how we might bring together our public library system with our local public schools to share costs. And in or nearby our schools we should make it possible for a parent to pursue a GED he or she didn't graduate from high school.

C. Preschool for All

We are also supporting the District's goal of *Preschool for All* by deeply exploring how the City's Head Start program can partner with the District's Early Education program to ensure that all children within the Community-Schools Zone have the opportunity to participate in early education.

In fact, I had the opportunity this week to participate in a planning retreat where District 205 leaders met with City Head Start leaders and were supported by many local community leaders. We are working on substantive ways of ensuring that every eligible student participates in early learning and that we respond to the needs of both children and adults while holding everyone accountable for doing their part. I am energized and inspired by this direction.

D. College and Career Readiness

I am also share the District's goal of ensuring that every Rockford Public School student is *College and Career Ready*. I serve on the Policy Board for Alignment Rockford and the Board of the Rockford Area Economic Development Council. I also serve as Chair the local Policy Board for the Workforce Investment Board. Through these organizations, we are supporting the opportunity to redesign the traditional high school to bring to the school the outstanding professional expertise and talents of our local employers and community members. I want to personally thank John Anderson and Laurie Preece and all of the leadership of Alignment Rockford for their great work on this effort. I also want to thank our partners from Alignment Nashville who have supported us as we explore the best way incorporate into our community their unique partnership model. Over the coming months, District 205 will evaluate the feasibility study for the high school redesign with the goal of launching the program at Jefferson High School next year.

E. 21st-Century Learning Environment

I also support the District's goal of improving the physical environment of our schools. One of the most direct ways we can help is to coordinate the capital planning within the Community Schools Empowerment Zone. Therefore, moving forward we will be creating plans for coordinated capital investments with our schools. Whether we're building roads or sidewalks or eliminating neighborhood blight, we will achieve better results when we plan and work together.

Frankly, our model for success in public-private partnerships is already there. We're blessed to have outstanding leadership from partners like Heartland Church. Heartland has been showering blessings on our public schools for several years now through Sharefest. I could say more, but I'll let their work speak for itself.

F. College for All

The final Readiness Rocks goal, "College for All" is a goal that I have discussed for several years. I have shared statistics many times on our low levels of college attainment. You have heard my call for Rockford to become a college town through the concept of a "City University" education network and my support for the "Rockford Promise" scholarship fund. I am absolutely energized by our growing vision that every Rockford student has a chance to attend college or career training after high school. I am even more excited by the idea that every Rockford student can pursue a world class post-secondary opportunity right here in our City.

I must admit to you tonight, however, that my interest in building our own local higher education opportunities goes beyond my job as a mayor. With my fourth child on the way, my wife, Stacy, and I have become very serious about college savings for our children. So, I ran the numbers recently on what we would have to save today for our one-year-old son, Dillon, to be able to attend my *alma mater*, Notre Dame, in 17 years if he were fortunate to get accepted.

Here is the image from the actual computer screen.

Allow me to share with you the honest truth of where I am now as a father trying to save money for my own children to attend College.

- Tuition for one year of undergraduate study at Notre Dame costs \$53,000 today;
- Based on the current rate of tuition inflation at Notre Dame, assuming my one-year old son, Dillon, was accepted, one year of study would be.
- I have three children and one more due this May.
- To save enough money for all of my children to attend Notre Dame, it would cost my wife and I 93,000 a year. That is more than I make in an entire year.

You might think that a State School like the University of Illinois would be a lot cheaper. Well tuition and room and board there is \$28,000/year now and with the State not only cutting aid but about to hand back to the Universities the responsibility for paying for their employees pensions, those costs will rise even faster.

Another alternative of course is to assume massive debt. But, frankly, I refuse to allow my children to go into a modern form of “indentured servitude” spending much of the rest of their adult lives saddled with college loans. Unfortunately, that is what is now happening to many individuals trying to pursue the promise of a better life through higher education. You know, there is one typical category of consumer debt that you can’t get discharged in a bankruptcy, yep, college loans. So the debt/loan system could haunt you the rest of your life.

There is a growing mass of media coverage on the so-called “college-debt bubble.” There is also a growing discussion on just how valuable a college education has become when one of the highest categories of the unemployed is a recent college graduate. And when you think about it, at a time when our city needs more local entrepreneurs starting a business, just how much risk can you take to start your own business when you owe ten of thousands in debt on a college loan. You might also recall that two of Americas most successful entrepreneurs, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, never graduated from college. And for that matter, Abraham Lincoln, our State’s most famous lawyer, never went to law school. There is another alternative. We can create our own affordable higher education solutions right here.

Rockford: A University’s Living Laboratory.

While we were disappointed last year to learn that Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University would not be opening up a residential campus, we were happy to see them take steps to expand their current degree offerings. What we learned from the ERAU recruiting process, however, is that we have a tremendous commitment from local employers to support expanded higher education opportunities in Rockford. The experience with Embry-Riddle has lead to outstanding gains in our knowledge of how to build our own local higher education network.

Tonight, I congratulate Rock Valley College and NIU for their commitment to the “running start” program allowing dual credit opportunities for students pursuing an engineering degree. I would also thank RAEDC for its leadership in reaching out to local employers for partnership opportunities. And if it works for engineering, what about other studies? Can the work that we are pioneering to build a local higher education network for engineers built be replicated in other areas of local expertise?

Academy for Performing, Visual, & Digital Arts

Tonight, I invite our local arts educators, arts professionals, and arts supporters to help us determine how we can leverage our many great arts resources to build a world class arts education network.

I am asking for help from our leaders at the Rockford Symphony Orchestra, the Rockford Dance Club, the Coronado Performing Arts Center, the Coronado Concert Association, the Rockford Area Venues and Entertainment Authority, the Mendelssohn Performing Arts Center, the Music Academy of Rockford, Kantori, the Rockford Art Museum, the Rockford Area Arts Council, Rock Valley College, Rockford College, School District 205, and our local private schools. If I missed someone, I apologize. It was not intentional.

We have many great arts professionals in Rockford and from Rockford. We have many more members of our community who utilize the skills they learned in the arts to expand their vision and abilities in their creative careers and to improve their quality of life. And we have the stated goal of our Rockford Public School Superintendent to improve fine arts education for our children.

We have many great artistic venues, but we also have many in disrepair. While we have a glorious Coronado Theater and an outstanding BMO Harris Bank Center, we also have a neglected Midway Theater and a neglected Times Theater. If you ask me how we're going to get this done, I can spend hours sharing ideas. But the truth is, I don't have all the answers. I do know that these visions don't get completed by magic. Likewise, the Midway and Times theaters are not going to get fixed if we do nothing, just like we're not going to get off the top 10 obesity list if we don't eat better and exercise more. Do you get what I'm saying? It's time for all of us to get our second wind and get busy. This recession isn't going anywhere soon and I don't expect any visits from the "job fairy." If we want to improve our future, we have to make it happen.

I am inspired, however, by knowing that we have so many great talented artists just like we have talented engineers. I'm inspired by director J.R. Sullivan or Broadway singer Marin Mazzie. I'm inspired by print maker and sculptor Roland Poska or photographers like Nels Akerlund and ten-year old pianist and composer, Emily Baer, who has already performed around the world. I'm inspired by television producer Shawn Ryan or Chairman of NBC Entertainment, Robert Greenblatt. And I am inspired by artists like Boylan graduate, Dan Lindsey, who co-directed the Academy Award winning Best Documentary, *The Undeclared*, whose score was written and produced by local artists, Miles Nielsen and Dan McMahon, who still call Rockford their home. Congratulations gentlemen on your success!

And I'm inspired by local Rockford College Student, Vince Charelli, who has a strong understanding of community and family and is already giving back.

CONCLUSION

We're on our own in so many respects and that's okay so long as it inspires us to start producing instead of waiting for someone else to save us. If we can come together in community partnership to transform how we pay for our roads, or transform how we purchase electricity for our homes and businesses, then we can also we come together to transform our efforts in education, economic development, health and wellness, and poverty reduction. We have every ability to be active partners and producers in education, healthcare, economic development, and social service.

To honor our God, to honor our parents, to honor our local history, and to honor our great country means that we don't let the crises that we face cause us to lose hope; we don't panic; we don't diminish our dreams. Yes, we will have to change. But those changes can be great for us. Those disruptions to the world we know just may help us create a better world, a better Rockford.

The truth is, we can have a lot healthier, safer, and more enjoyable community than we have today. Even better than the good old days. But the only way we can do it is if we stay confident in who we are; if we stay committed to improving ourselves; and if we have the courage to make our own future and tell our own story.

THIS IS OUR CITY. THIS IS OUR STORY. THIS IS OUR TIME.